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HOMEMAKERS' CHAT

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U. S. DEPARTMENT
OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF INFORMATION

(Release on receipt)

SUBJECT: "How the War Affected Civilian Textiles"--Information from the Bureau of Human Nutrition and Home Economics, U.S. Department of Agriculture

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If you sew for your family...you know from your own experience how hard it's been to find materials for sewing...what poor substitutes you've had to take for the yard goods you used to buy.

You can get a good picture of the nationwide shortages and the change in quality from a study recently reported by textile scientists of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They made the study in cooperation with research workers of four states--Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Minnesota and Washington.

The USDA representatives in the District of Columbia and the research workers in each of the states surveyed department and dry goods stores in typical cities in the five areas to find what piece goods were available to the homemaker.

Then, where they could get it...they bought one fabric each of three qualities--the best, medium and the poorest of certain cotton, rayon, wool and part-wool fabrics 14 in all. Needless to say they were able to get only one quality of some types of the material. And in some cases...they were unable to find the material at all. They found rayons generally more plentiful than cottons. And rayons compared more favorably to the quality of pre-war fabrics than did the cottons.

Most of us judge the quality of material on how well it will wash and wear. The scientists tested the fabrics in the laboratory. Under the microscope they counted the number of yarns to the inch. They checked the fabrics for breaking strength, for colorfastness, and for shrinkage. They also checked them for sizing. That's the substance put in the goods to give it a smooth finish. It usually comes out when the material is washed or cleaned.

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The study showed that some of the materials homemakers used in great quantities in peacetime had practically disappeared from the market. No 80-square percale, no fine count 2-ply broadcloth or voile, and very little gingham chambray, muslin nainsook, lawn or poplin were available.

Something else. The laboratory tests showed that many wartime fabrics had very little in common with peacetime materials sold under the same name. For example... fabrics sold for cotton broadcloth looked more like coarse dress percale or sheeting than broadcloth. Materials usually called linene and unglazed chintz were sold in some places as percale.

The tests showed that weaker yarns were used in the wartime fabrics. And in some cases...a great amount of sizing was used. Some chambrays has over 10 percent. And one fabric---sold as broadcloth--had 27 percent of sizing. That's nearly one-third. You can imagine how sleazy that goods was after washing.

As for colorfastness...the cotton fabrics bought for the study fell into two extreme groups. Government rejected materials had excellent colorfastness. In others...the colorfastness was poorer even than that of similar materials bought in prewar years. Few of the cotton fabrics held their color satisfactorily when they were washed...exposed to light...or wet with perspiration.

Many of the cottons shrank. A fourth of the materials were 10 percent shorter ---that's three and a half inches a yard--after washing than before. Some of the cotton fabrics stretched when they were washed. In general...when cotton fabrics were marked "pre-shrunk"...they did not shrink badly...not more than two percent. But few wartime fabrics were labeled as to shrinkage.

And when goods were not labeled...the homemaker had to buy at her own risk.

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